The Fourth Church Pulpit

KEEPING GOD AT ARM'S LENGTH

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Luke 5:1-11
"Go away from me, Lord, ..." Luke 5:8b (NRSV)

I don't know about you, but if I am working hard at a task and getting absolutely nowhere, making no progress at all, and someone comes along and shows me a simple little maneuver, and I try it and suddenly I accomplish the task — suddenly, because of the advice I just received I am able to make the wallpaper fit, or the window sash work, or the equation balance, or complete my sermon for that matter — I would not tell the person who gave me the advice to go away!

I don't know about you, but I don't think Peter's response is very appropriate. After all, he had been sitting in that boat all night long staring at an empty net. Jesus of Nazareth suggests that he put out into deeper waters and after a somewhat skeptical rejoinder, that's what Peter does, mostly because he figures he's tried everything he can think of and there's nothing to lose except time and he's got a lot of that. And when he puts the net down, it's right in the middle of a school of fish and when he and his partners try to pull it in it is actually too heavy, so they call the other boat for help. And the same thing happens to that boat. So that at the end of the story both boats are full of fish and Peter and company are pretty happy I'd say. And as they head in, Peter surely says to Jesus, "How'd you do that? How'd you know where all those fish were? How about we meet here again tomorrow morning and maybe you could sign on as our spotter?" That's how a fisherman, an entrepreneur would respond. Not, as the story tells it — "Go away from me, Lord." "Depart from me" the older version translated it strongly, "for I am a sinful man."

What do you make of this peculiar story — this strange behavior on the part of Peter? What do you suppose Luke, who wrote the account, wants us to think about? The other Gospels tell the story of Peter and James and John becoming followers of Jesus very differently. In Matthew and Mark, they're sitting in their boats, beached, repairing their nets when Jesus walks by and invites them to follow. Why do you suppose Luke puts them in the boat, fishing all night — unsuccessfully? And whatever does he have in mind by telling us that Peter asked Jesus to go away — as part, apparently, of his decision to follow, to be a disciple, to be a Christian? Unless it's just that ... that in a sense becoming his follower always includes within it the tendency to ask him to go away.

A clue perhaps is in a short story written by modern American author Annie Dillard. The title is "God in the Doorway" and in it she recalls a Christmas Eve long ago: she and her family had just returned home from dinner to a warm living room and their Christmas Eve celebration.

> "There was a commotion at the front door: it opened, and cold wind blew around my dress.
>
> 'Look who's here! Look who's here!'
>
> "It was Santa Claus, whom I never — ever — wanted to meet. Santa was looming in the doorway and looking around for me. My mother's voice was thrilled: 'Look who's here!' I ran upstairs."

And then she explains:

> "Like everyone in his right mind, I feared Santa Claus, thinking he was God. I was still thoughtless and brute, reactive. I knew right from wrong, but had barely tested the possibility of shaping my own behavior, and then only from fear, and not yet from love. Santa Claus was an old man you never saw, but who nevertheless saw you ... He knew when you'd been bad or good. He knew when you'd been bad or good! And I had been bad."

Her mother called, pleading. Her father encouraged, her sister howled. But she did not come down ...

Santa actually was a neighbor, Miss White, whom Annie Dillard liked. One time, quite by accident, Miss White was showing her how a magnifying glass focuses the rays of the sun and trained the spot on Annie Diallard's hand until it started to burn and she ran home crying.

Years later she wrote:

> "Even now, I wonder: if I meet God, will he take and hold my bare hand in his, and focus his eye on my palm, and kindle that spot and let me burn?"

She concludes with an intriguing paragraph that is good theology and perhaps a commentary on our text:

> "But no. It is I who misunderstood everything and let everybody down. Miss White, God, I am sorry I ran from you. I am still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. For you meant only love, and love, and I felt only fear, and pain. So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway, between two worlds, and we were all afraid." [*Teaching A Stone to Talk*, "God in the Doorway" p. 137-139]

There is apparently both an attraction and a revulsion going on in this story Luke tells us about Jesus and Peter. It is apparently not uncommon. The shepherds were afraid when angels announced his birth. His good friends were afraid and tried to hide when they first started to suspect something strange was happening after his crucifixion.

Georgetown Philosophy Professor, Jerome Miller, wrote an essay about worship in which he described God as

> "the ultimate other from which I am unconsciously always in flight. Ordinarily," he said, "we spend our whole lives trying not to heed ... the sacred." [Martin E. Marty, *Context*, 12/21/94]

Francis Thompson's famous poem *The Hound of Heaven* portrays a person trying to get away, running from God:

> "I fled Him, down the night and
> down the days:
> I fled Him, down the arches of
> the years;
> I fled him, down the labyrinthine
> ways of my own mind; and in
> the midst of tears
> I hid from Him ..."

Distinguished German thinker, Rudolph Otto, wrote about those close encounters with what he called *The Holy* ...

> "The Mysterium Tremendum" ... "the trembling speechless humility of the creature in the presence ... of that which is a mystery inexpressible." [*The Idea of the Holy*, p. 12-13]

There is, apparently, both a compelling fascination about God — mystery, the holy — within us, but also a kind of fear in the presence of anything we cannot fully understand, a kind of caution at the very least, a sense of not wanting to get too close, a tendency to want to keep God at arm's length.

Some think that tendency shows up even in our religion. David Buttrick thinks that preachers are the culprits: that in order to make Christianity more palatable, which is always in the preacher's professional interests, less threatening to anybody's status quo, we make it bland and soft — user friendly.

Church growth experts know that if you begin with market research, asking what your customers want and then program it, you'll have a much better chance at market success than if you begin with Jesus' invitation to take up a cross and follow. The Jesus Christ proclaimed by too many of us, Buttrick says, is a

> "therapeutic carer, sensitive, psychologically perceptive — who saves us by accepting us, and thus enables us to accept ourselves, to have a positive self image and to be happy." [*Preaching Jesus Christ*, p. 27]

President of United Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, Leonard Sweet, agrees:

> "Whereas Peter cried out, 'Depart from me, O Lord,' today we cry out, 'O God, you make me feel so good.'"

Luke tells a story that reminds us that one of the things that happens when we get close to God is that we are suddenly aware of our own humanness. When we get close to the humanity of Jesus Christ, our own humanity suddenly doesn't seem so hot, so good. From the beginning of time, human beings have been aware of something about themselves like sin whenever they approach the mystery of God.

The prophet Isaiah in the Temple sees a vision of God and feels a live coal touched to his mouth and says

> "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." [Isaiah 6:5]

There is, that is to say, precedent for keeping God at arm's length.

Stephen Carter, a Yale Law Professor, thinks we have built the dynamic into popular culture. In his bestseller, *The Culture of Unbelief*, Professor Carter points out that while nine out of ten of us believe in God and four out of five pray regularly, culturally we are encouraged to keep it secret.

> "The message of contemporary American culture seems to be that it is perfectly all right to believe that stuff — but you really ought to keep it to yourself." [p. 25]

The press is not sure what to make of former President Carter's simple, straightforward Christian faith. An odd article in last Sunday's *New York Times* magazine agonized over it again. When the former President says that he wants to work for peace because it is part of his deepest religious conviction, almost nobody wants to believe him.

Every time President Bush said the word "God" he was lambasted from all sides. And when Hillary Rodham Clinton wore a cross around her neck many observers were aghast and one television commentator wondered on the air if it were "appropriate for the First Lady to display so openly a religious symbol." [*Ibid.*, p. 4]

Religion in the *Culture of Disbelief*, according to Stephen Carter, is like

> "building model airplanes, just another hobby: something quiet, private, trivial — not really a fit activity for intelligent, public spirited adults." [*Ibid.*, p. 22]

And so, perhaps for all of us, there is both an attraction — after all, we are here, aren't we? — and also a tendency to keep our guard up, keep God at arm's length.

What might happen if we got too close? What might happen if we consciously invited Jesus Christ into our lives and made a conscious decision to live as we sense he would want us to live; to follow wherever he leads?

Do you remember that old Sunday School picture of Jesus standing at the door knocking, based on a verse in Revelation: "Behold, I stand at the door knocking." Someone wrote a piece a while ago that said when Jesus knocks on your door, maybe you shouldn't answer. Because if you answer — he might come in. And if he comes in, he might rearrange all the furniture in your house, might reorganize your life, might even redirect it. You might find yourself becoming a new person.

Maybe you don't want that to happen. Maybe you're perfectly content with the way things are in your life. But maybe you do. Maybe you want some things to be different. Maybe you're looking for a new direction ... a new purpose for your life ... maybe you'd like to become a new person. Maybe you want some sense that you are living in intimate relationship with the one who made you and who loves you and who will never stop loving you.

The good news — the great news — is that Jesus ignored Peter. Peter, for a whole variety of reasons, asked Jesus to go away and let him, Peter, just go on being Peter, fisherman, husband, son-in-law, father. But Jesus did not go away ... did not abandon Peter, stayed with Peter through the most incredible three years of traveling and teaching: did not

go away from Peter even when Peter was unwilling or unable to understand, stayed with him even when, near the end, Peter was shamefully denying that he even knew Jesus, stayed with him even when Peter ran in fear to save his own life.

The great news is that Jesus did not come to judge and condemn Peter — which I think is why Peter wanted him to go away — but to love him into salvation, to love him with such fierce strength that Peter became a new creation and was so full of love himself that he lived the rest of his life in joyful and faithful service to his Lord.

Annie Dillard wrote:

> "It is I who misunderstood ... Miss White, God, I am sorry I ran from you. I am still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. For you meant only love, and love, and I felt only fear, and pain ... So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid." [Dillard, *loc. cit.*]

It is the deepest meaning of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper that, in ways you and I can't begin to understand or explain, God comes close and invites us to be in communion, to let down the barriers, the arm's length, safe practice of our religion and to invite into our hearts — our souls — our lives — that fierce love which is God ... that love from which there is no refuge ... that love that will never let us go ... love which in Jesus Christ "stands in the doorway, between two worlds."

Amen.